

My experience as a MEXT programme for Japanese Studies student

Hello, my name is Luigi Pignatti. At the time of me writing this report, I am a third year Japanology student at KULeuven. I was lucky enough to be selected for the MEXT programme for Japanese Studies in 2024, and have been studying at Waseda University in Tokyo since September.

As a Japanese studies student, I have been looking forward to studying in Japan since I entered university. Unfortunately, the amount of exchange possibilities are limited, and because I wanted to exchange while I was still in my bachelors, the MEXT programme was the perfect opportunity. I applied, and although I didn't believe that I would pass, successfully did the exam and interview, and was lucky enough to have been accepted by Waseda University.

I decided to stay at a dorm, and the first few weeks were very busy because of multiple reasons. The first was settling into the dorm, meeting other students and building up a friend group. Luckily there were many activities that were organised by the dorm and the university, where I have been able to meet many amazing people. Secondly there was the course selection. Because I am following the Japanese language course I have to take up a certain amount of credits at the CJL (Center for Japanese Learning), and almost all of the courses at the CJL are only 1 credit, so in the end I had a lot of different classes. This made it so that I had a lot of class hours, and also a lot of weekly homework, so be prepared to work everyday to keep up with classes when you get to Japan! It is still however slightly lighter than studying at KULeuven would be in my opinion, since at KULeuven most of the work would be done in the weeks leading up to the exams, while at Waseda the exams are easier and carry less weight in your total score. Finally, the paperwork. The amount of flyers, instruction letters, homework, government mail and other paperwork I have received is unbelievable. I used to be a disorganised person, however staying in Japan and trying to read all your mail, not forget any homework and try to get all the residency paperwork sorted whipped me into shape. I may have said studying at Waseda is easier, but that is on the condition that you are able to keep yourself organised, not forget deadlines and work for school most days of the week.

I have not had too much time to visit other places in Japan until now, but I have heard from other people that they for example have been able to choose courses so that they don't have class on Mondays ever, and so have 3 days every week to go visit places. Many people even take planes and go on trips through East- or Southeast-Asia. If you work ahead during the week, it is relatively easy to free up a weekend, and I have also done so to take some trips, mostly to Yokohama South of Tokyo to visit friends and go sightseeing. The premier opportunity for trips however is definitely the spring break, where we have over 2 months off where I am planning to go to Seoul and Hokkaido. I am currently also writing my bachelor paper, so this is a prime opportunity to visit locations and read documents that you wouldn't have been able to in Belgium.

Lastly, as a Japanese Studies student, I believe it to be appropriate to talk about my experience learning the language here. Firstly, staying in Japan and talking to Japanese people on a daily basis definitely increases your confidence in the language. Practicing daily and in everyday situations helps a lot with understanding Japanese easier and being able to speak it more fluently. There is also no lack of new words to learn all around you: in the menu of the Izakaya, on the signs around the city or advertisements on TV. You are continuously stimulated with new vocabulary and reminded of words you may have forgotten. Secondly, I am currently taking level 6 courses at Waseda (out of 8), and my classes are completely in Japanese. Your teachers speak only Japanese and so do your fellow students. Within a week, it is very possible that you will have spoken more Japanese in class than you would have in a month at home. There is however a noticeable shift in the way Japanese is taught at

Waseda if you compare it to KULeuven in my opinion. Here, grammar and kanji classes are largely optional, so you will have more classes that handle specific interests like classes where you analyse Japanese movies or classes where you read a book in Japanese. This is definitely a shift from the around 50/50 theoretical to practical class distribution that there is at KULeuven. It is a different way of learning, however if you prefer more theoretical classes, you can still choose more of them since you have more choices. I want to stress that you should look into your classes well before you pick them. There are many choices, and a lot of information is available about them on the Waseda website once you have an account, so use it to make a class schedule that fits you best!

I hope that this report has been able to make a lot of things about the program and studying in Japan more clear. Please do not hesitate to write me an e-mail if you would have any questions for me at puigipignatti@gmail.com . If you are a Japanese Studies student interested in this program, I highly encourage you to partake in it. My year is almost half over and I already wish I did not have to go back, this year will most definitely be one that I will look back on with joy for the rest of my life. Studying Japanese Studies means that you are interested in Japan, and I promise you that you will come to love Japan even more when you are able to put all of your knowledge to practical use.

